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SUBJECT: AH1N1 INFLUENZA IN MOLDOVA

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Sensitive but not classified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The level of concern about H1N1 influenza is rising in Moldova. Though so far Moldova has only been hit by two deaths and 113 confirmed cases, new cases are reported daily, (36 on November 6), and both government and population are starting to feel jittery, particularly as the situation is much worse in neighboring Ukraine. The Government of Moldova (GOM) has asked the USG to provide 50,000 vaccines, and has also appealed to all embassies for vaccine donations. We are exploring numerous possibilities for providing assistance to Moldova. The Minister of Health held a press conference on November 5 to reassure the population that Moldova was not experiencing an epidemic. However, the government has begun taking measures such as tightening airport vigilance, and extending the late-autumn school vacation to keep children home from school. End Summary.

A (H1N1) IN MOLDOVA

¶2. (SBU) Moldova has experienced two deaths connected to the new type influenza A (H1N1) virus, on October 23 and November 3. The first victim fell ill following a return from Poland while the second victim had recently returned to Moldova from Moscow. As of November 3, the media stated that laboratory tests had confirmed 29 cases of pandemic flu in Moldova, while on November 4 the National Centre of Preventive Medicine (NCPM) announced that ten more cases of pandemic flu had been confirmed in the previous 24 hours in Moldova, bringing the total to 39 people affected by the virus at that point. According to reports on November 6, Moldova has 113 confirmed cases.

H1N1 Spreading in the Region

¶3. (SBU) The spread of A (H1N1) in Moldova came against the backdrop of sensationalist news headlines and growing unease in Moldova over H1N1 and its spread in the region. Romania has confirmed 555 cases of pandemic flu, while Ukraine has reported more than 200,000 cases, with 70 deaths. Moldovans have little confidence in the

local, decrepit public health system. The epidemic in Ukraine spurred a run on some drugstores in Moldova; during the last few days, masks and antiviral preparations have disappeared from many pharmacies. Ukrainians who live near the border with Moldova have purchased entire stocks of antiviral preparations and masks in Otaci and Soroca and other towns near Moldova's Ukrainian border.

A Request from Q and a Misstep by Q the GOM

¶4. (SBU) On November 2, Foreign Minister Leanca asked the Ambassador if the USG could provide 50,000 doses of vaccine. This was followed by a written request from the Ministry of Health requesting vaccines for A (H1N1) flu virus for immunizing the population in high-risk categories, including pregnant women, children under two years old, and patients with chronic maladies. In a session of Parliament on November 3, Minister of Health Vladimir Hotineanu called on foreign donors to provide vaccine and said that the American Embassy had already responded by promising 50,000 doses of vaccine. (Note: Hotineanu spoke out of turn, and we have informed the GOM of the difficulties in and options for obtaining vaccines, and that while we are actively seeking sources of help, we can make no specific promises. End Note.)

Other Sources of Assistance

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¶5. (SBU) UNICEF's Chisinau office has told us that Moldova, along with eight other countries in the region, is scheduled to receive 400,000 doses of vaccine from WHO's H1N1 stockpile, a figure calculated to cover approximately 10 percent of the population. However, because of Moldova's Category 2 status, the first tranche of 80,000 (2 percent of the population) is not scheduled to arrive until December, and the full distribution is not expected until May 2010. Priority for the first doses will be given to health care workers. The GOM has requested 500,000 doses from the WHO. Buying sufficient vaccines on the open market (at a cost between USD 2.50 and USD 20 per dose, depending on concessions and ability to pay) is out of the question for the financially strapped government.

GoM Measures and Social Reactions

¶6. (SBU) Already in September, the municipal government in the capital Chisinau began installation of soap dispensers and hand dryers in the 144 schools in Chisinau to prevent infection with the virus. With the recent outbreak on its borders, the GOM also has begun taking prophylactic measures. Airport employees who are in direct contact with passengers have been ordered to wear gloves and disposable masks. The government is also attempting to reduce vectors for the spread of the virus by extending school holidays, adding ten days (November 9-20) to the regular late autumn break taking place this week (November 2-6). The government has recommended that parents not send their children to kindergartens. At least one conference Q a gathering of the Youth Governing Institute in Moldova, scheduled for November 9 Q has been

postponed for at least two weeks. Moldova State University has been placed on quarantine; the rumor among the students is that some professors are infected.

GoM Actions and Efforts to Reassure Population

¶7. (SBU) A Republican Extraordinary Anti-Epidemic Commission has been established, and has prepared an action plan on measures to prevent, combat and intervene in cases of pandemic flu. Prime Minister Filat chaired a meeting of this commission on November 2, and has asked for a daily briefing on H1N1. The Commission will meet again on November 6. The Ministry of Health convened a meeting of heads of Moldovan public medical institutions on November 3 to discuss hospitals' preparations.

¶8. (SBU) On November 5, the Minister of Health convened a press conference. Seeking to reassure the population, he stressed that the situation in Moldova is much better than in the neighboring countries and insisted that there is no flu epidemic in Moldova. He defined an epidemic as the presence of 750 cases of infection per 100,000 population. The Minister reported that only 65 cases had been confirmed in Moldova at that point.

¶9. (SBU) Nonetheless, the media report that the demand for anti-flu drugs and masks has risen significantly over the past week. Many drugstores have used up all their stocks. Minister of Health Hotineanu acknowledged that there was a shortage of anti-flu drugs and masks.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) While the level of infection in Moldova is still comparatively low, the level of concern here is rising rapidly. The good news is that the government is mobilizing and attempting efforts to address preventing the spread of the virus. However, we have not seen any educational efforts noting the low lethality rate of H1N1 compared to normal seasonal influenza or encouraging measures

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such as washing hands. In the interests of prevention and support for the new government, we will continue our efforts to assist the GOM.

CHAUDHRY